

"DRESSING FOR THE BANQUET"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

TV journalist, Hugh Downs, and his wife were in Washington attending a rather fancy affair...one of those thousand dollar a plate banquets; after it was over and they were packing their bags to return here to the city by plane, they were notified that due to bad weather their flight had been cancelled. Hugh Downs called the front desk and was informed that they could catch a five o'clock train which was leaving in forty-five minutes. Mrs. Downs was showering and to save time, Hugh Downs quickly put all of their belongings in their two suitcases and called the front desk to have someone come get them and rush them to the train station. The bellhop came seconds later and took their suitcases.

Five minutes later, Mrs Downs stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and said to her husband,

"Hugh, dear...would you please bring me my green dress... it's right there on the bed...."

Now we're not told just how this "green dress" dilemma was resolved, nor are we given any clue as to what was said. Only this. They missed the train and their bags arrived in Penn Station before they even left Washington.

DEVELOPMENT

Somehow and for some reason that little incident reminded me of one of the parables of Jesus about a banquet and getting dressed for it. Jesus said,

"The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to a King who gave a wedding banquet for his son..."

Yes....the King's son was to be married...at long last. And it was a very proud moment for the king and for the people of his entire kingdom and so from every town and village people were invited to come...to the wedding and to the great feast that would follow. Who would refuse the King's invitation?

Wedding invitations state the exact time of the wedding but that wasn't the case back in the time of Jesus. People would be invited to a wedding feast and would accept without knowing the exact time. And then when everything was prepared, when the bride and groom were ready and the feast was complete, the servants would go out and spread the word.

"Everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet"

And everyone would come for the grand celebration. However, in this parable told by Jesus, there was only one problem and if you listened to the scripture lesson, you know what the problem was. Nobody came. Yes, nobody showed up! The king had issued the invitations and the servants had put them in the mail boxes, but when everything was ready - NOBODY CAME! Now, just imagine how you would feel if you had gone to all that trouble and spent a lot of money and then no one showed. You'd be upset. Hurt. Angry. The tables were all buckling under the weight of the food, but no one was there. You'd be furious and the King was. And we would have to acknowledge that he had reason to be. Three things to "lift up" in connection with this parable. And it's important to hear them.

EVERYONE WAS INVITED

First of all, please notice that everyone was invited to the feast. I like that. It suggests an openness that I resonate to. You could say that God plays no favorites. The banquet table of God is open to all. All are invited. Inclusive and not exclusive.

Some of you may remember the name of Huey Long. He was that very colorful politician from Louisiana who had hopes of running for the presidency back there in the nineteen thirties. I think it was 1936. He began as an unschooled farmboy and ended up in the governor's mansion. A very popular politician in the history of the state of Louisiana. He was born in the central part of the state and when he first campaigned for governor, one of the old timers from down state in New Orleans said this to him.

"Huey....you know South Louisiana is different from the northern part of the state. We have a lot of Catholic voters down here...."

Huey Long nodded his head and went out to make his speech which began like this,

"Friends....when I was a boy, I'd get up at six every Sunday morning...hitch our old horse up to the buggy and take my Catholic grandparents to mass. I'd bring them home and then I'd take my Baptist grandparents around to the little Baptist Church...."

They say that the speech was a roaring success and afterward a New Orleans political boss came up to him and said,

"Huey....you've been aholdin' out on us. Why we didn't know you had Catholic grandparents". And Huey looked at him....slyly...and said, "Why we didn't even have a horse".

Don't let anybody mislead you. Around the banquet table of our Lord there won't be Baptists or Catholics or Methodists. There won't even be a head table reserved for the very saintly. There will only be sinners for whom Christ died. And that includes you and me. Everyone is invited. That's the "Good News", but the "bad news" is that not everyone will attend. Not everyone will attend.

NOT EVERYONE WILL ATTEND

And that takes us on to the second point of this "three point" parable. Although persons from the entire kingdom were invited to the wedding banquet no one showed up! Think of it.

Who would refuse to attend a "once in a lifetime" event like this? It would be like accepting an invitation from the White House and then "standing up" the President. I don't know of anyone who would do such a thing. And yet...when the servants announced that the feast was ready some of the people mocked the king, saying,

"I wouldn't attend his rotten son's wedding even if you paid me a million dollars....who does that 'good for nothing' think he is...raising our taxes and then having the nerve to expect us to go to his son's wedding?"

Other people told the servants that they were just too busy with other "more important" things. The point is that they exercised their freedom to refuse the invitation. And that sort of thing does happen, even today...all the time.

A story to share. Fate brought two young men together. One was named Jeff. Jeff had to make a decision whether to attend the local university or attend a Christian College away from home. He worked it through and came to the conclusion that it was God's will for him to attend the local university even though it meant he might be ridiculed for his strict adherence to his Christian beliefs and lifestyle. That conservative lifestyle might be an object of scorn and humor. His roommate, Tim Conaway, was more "worldly", a young man whose main interest in life was living it to the fullest come what may. And often Tim and his friends would poke a bit of fun at Jeff. After all, it can be uncomfortable living with a saint. Jeff was noted for his punctuality, always keeping his appointments on time, which got under Tim's skin because Tim, on the other hand, was known for always coming in late...he could never get there on time.

One second semester afternoon when Tim came back to the dorm room he found Jeff lying on the floor. He called for the paramedics and they rushed Jeff to the Emergency Room of a nearby hospital, but it was too late. Jeff had suffered a massive coronary. Granted, it's unusual for one so young to be stricken like this, but it does happen. Just ask the family and friends and teammates of Reggie Lewis who died suddenly this summer up in Boston.

Jeff's family received friends before the funeral service and Tim and some of his friends attended. Upon their arrival, they happened to notice a very special floral arrangement. The arrangement included a telephone with the receiver dangling and a red ribbon with these words, "Jesus called. Jeff answered."

Tim overheard two aunts talking about Jeff. The aunt in the blue dress said "how glad Jeff would be to see Jesus". The aunt wearing the purple dress replied, "But I'll bet Jesus was glad to see Jeff, too...."

The Holy Spirit began to work in Tim's life. He found it difficult to sleep that night and for several nights following as he reflected on those words on the red ribbon, "Jesus called. Jeff Answered". A few days later in helping to pack up Jeff's books and belongings, Tim noticed his Bible. There was a marker in it that opened to Hebrews 9:27...where it reads, "It is appointed unto man once to die". Beside the verse, Jeff had written, "One must keep his appointment with God".

Well, that was too much for Tim. "Keeping an appointment with God". He knelt down by his bunk in the dormitory room that night and prayed and really opened up his life and his heart to God. We would say in some religious circles that Jeff's Savior became Tim's Savior, too. And after this, Tim always kept his appointments knowing that someday in God's timing, he, too, would come to meet the Savior "face to face".

"Jesus called. Jeff answered". A lot of people fail to answer that call, in this life. A lot of people have taken the phone off the hook and that is so sad. But one day that final call does come. Everyone is invited to the banquet. However, some, for one reason or another, chose not to attend. Are you one of them?

Rick Fox, a teammate and a close friend of Reggie Lewis of the Celtics, tried to express his love and affection for his 27 year old teammate just after his tragic death on the practice court at Brandeis late last June. And gasping for breath through his tears and speaking only in partial sentences, Rick Fox said,

"My thoughts the last 48 hours - questions, questions, questions and questions...with no answers...."

I believe that our faith does provide us with answers, but they come only when one is willing to take the time to listen, to keep those "spiritual" appointments and yes - to accept the invitation to the banquet of the King.

IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE WHEN WE SAY "YES" TO GOD'S INVITATION

And this brings us to

the last thing to be "lifted up". It does make a difference, dear friend, that we say our personal "yes" to God's invitation.

Now, back to the King. He was not going to let this great feast go to waste, to let it go uneaten. And so he sent his servants out into the streets to invite "in" anyone they saw to this wedding banquet. The servants did as they were told. They went into the streets and invited anyone they saw, "both good and bad". And as a result the banquet hall was filled with people. The mood was festive. It was a great feast and everyone had a good time, a grand time. It was not at all unusual for a wedding feast to last for a few days, or even a week. The people invited had never in all of their lives experienced such a feast. Laughing, singing and dancing....a time of great joy!

And do you know what happened? In the midst of all of this celebrating, the King entered the banquet hall. And there in front of Him was someone dressed in an improper way. Maybe he had encountered the same difficulty that Mrs. Downs encountered. Perhaps his suitcase with his proper clothes was on the train running down to Jericho or up to Galilee. Whatever the reason, the King was very upset by his inappropriate garb...and he said,

"Friend....how did you ever get in here without a wedding robe?" The man was speechless. The King called his servants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be no weeping and gnashing of teeth....for many are called, but FEW are chosen!"

Admittedly, that comes across to us as being pretty harsh. Why would the King throw the poor fellow out? Wasn't he, after all, an invited guest? How do you answer it? One wonders...could it be that the King felt that this improperly dressed man was not taking this occasion seriously enough? Could be. Perhaps this part of the parable is a subtle way designed to reinforce the idea that God's invitation really does matter. Punctuality. Dress. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" as the Scripture puts it.

You and I have been reading about the "politics of meaning" as espoused by our First Lady, Hillary Rodham Clinton. (And wasn't she marvellous appearing before Congress to explain the Health Care proposal!) "Politics of meaning"....a phrase coined by writer, Michael Lerner. The "politics of meaning"....based on the idea that Americans are hungry not for just those things that politicians

offer - economic entitlements and political rights, but for MEANING in their lives. Says Lerner,

"Human beings have a deep need to have their lives make sense"

Yes, to make sure their lives do count for something. I believe there is a lot of truth in that. I think that Woody Allen, inspite of all of his personal problems, has appealed to many of us because he has been obsessed with the search for meaning. Much of his humor reflects that search. It was Woody Allen, as I recall, who once said:

"Most of the time I don't have much fun. The rest of the time I don't have any fun at all...."

He seems to come up with far more questions than he does answers. He doesn't call himself an atheist, but God's "loyal opposition". However, one thing is clear and that is that Woody Allen has not found what he is searching for, and there is not one of us in this room who would want to trade places with him. It would be difficult to paint a more telling picture of the bleakness of life experienced by people trying to find an alternative to God than the sad headlines that have surrounded Woody Allen this past year.

CLOSING It does make a difference that somewhere down the road we say "yes" to God's great invitation. There is no other way that life will ever make sense. There is no way joy will ever break into our lives. Saying "yes" to God is the garment that keeps us from wandering forever in a terrible darkness....where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

George Borrow was on one of his journeys and along the way he tells us that he encountered a band of gypsies. They spent time in friendly conversation. As he was preparing to move on he was amazed to hear their aged leader say, "O, Sir...we want God. Can you give us God?" Borrow was embarrassed. He really didn't know what to say and tried to shift the conversation into other channels. And as a final gesture he gave the children some money. But again, the older gypsie persisted, "Sir, we don't want your money.....can't you give us God?"

Deep down this is the cry of every human heart? "Jesus called. Jeff answered". Rick Fox of the Celtics, said that afternoon in Boston, "Questions, questions, questions...but no answers". There are answers....but what about you? There is a place set for you at His banquet. You're free to attend as you choose. And if you choose to attend, I can tell you this....you'll never regret it, for inside the banquet hall people are laughing, singing and dancing. And why shouldn't they? For this is the King's banquet. His Son is there. His only Son, our Lord. And all of life is lighted and lifted by His presence. All are invited. Not everyone attends. But for those who do, it makes all the difference in the world!

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Speak to each of us the "word" that we need to hear. Prepare us to sit at Your banquet feast...remembering that there is a place there for each of us and if we choose to attend, it can make all the difference in the world. In the spirit of Christ we now pray. Amen.